COMMUNION MEDITATION
Matthew 2:7-15
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They have one glorious moment on the stage and, then, as suddenly as they appear, fade forever into the recesses of history. The Gospel According to Matthew calls them "wise men". Their story adds enigma and mystery, intrigue and complexity to the humble birth.

The ambiguity of their story is caught exquisitely in a poem by the late T.S. Eliot, Journey of the Magi. It is one of my favorites.

"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly."

The narrative describes how they found the stable, and then at the end Mr. Eliot has been reflecting back on the experience from the perspective of years...

"All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down,
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death."

Who were they? "Magi" - plural, the text doesn't say how many there were only that they brought three gifts. The word itself is very old; "Magus"; it referred originally to a tribe of priests in the ancient Persian Empire. They were regarded as seers, magicians, sometimes healers. They knew a lot about astronomy, and they incorporated the knowledge into a mystery religion not unlike modern astrology. New truth, significant events in human history, the Magi believed, were signaled by the stars. It was commonly held that the birth of a great person would be accomplished by the appearance of a new star.

Now let me tell you more than you probably want to know by way of historical detail. There is an error in the Roman Calendar by which we are still counting years. Herod, under whose reign Jesus was born, and who ordered the slaughter of the innocents, died in 4 BC. We know that. If the Holy Family lived in Egypt for two years, the birth must have happened in 6 BC. In 7 BC, the astronomers tell us there was a very unusual phenomenon in the sky. The planets Jupiter and Saturn converged three times to create an unusual brightness which would have been noticeable to anyone familiar with the stars. It happened in May and again in September and finally in December.

The story is not implausible. Babylonian Magi, watching the stars every night, and seeing this unusual brightness, would have concluded that something very important was happening somewhere.

And so they set out traveling West, following the night. When they arrived in Jerusalem, ancient capital of the Jews, occupied by Roman troops, they called at the Royal Palace of Herod the Great, one of the more unsavory characters in history. Herod was a puppet whose power and authority depended entirely on his standing with Rome. In order to consolidate his position Herod had arranged for the murder of members of his own family. Hearing about his cruelty, Caesar Augustus observed, "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son."

The Magi probably assumed that Herod had recently become a father. His son would become King of the Jews. It was his star they had seen. But Herod had not become a father recently, and as tyrants ordinarily do, Herod sensed in this visit the signs of conspiracy. He convened the religious scholars and asked them a subtle question: "If there is anything to this Messiah business you are always prattling about, and if God actually sent one to you, where, pray tell, would he be born?"

With the gravity religious professionals always seems to express whenever governmental authorities seem to need them, the scribes and priests quoted the prophet Micah... "And you, O Bethlehem, from you shall come a ruler."

It was Herod who pointed the way. Think of it! Child murderer guiding the Babylonian priests to the manger. It was just five more miles and they found the inn which was probably the only inn and the family out back in the barn. And they opened their camel-sacks and brought out gifts every bit as strange as they were. Frankincense, a fragrant gum resin, burned in Hebrew worship: Myrrh, fragrant oil, used for beauty, sensuality and for burial anointing. Jesus was given Myrrh - three times - at His birth, on His cross, and in death, by Nicodemus: and gold, the gift of royalty.

Perhaps the most significant part of the story is the brief half-sentence at the end, "they departed to their own country by another way." Having seen the Christ, everything was suddenly changed. The traditional route home was no longer possible. To take it would have meant betrayal: they would have shown Herod the way. The simple encounter with the Christ Child meant the necessity of making a difficult decision and taking a longer, less familiar, more dangerous road into the future.

There are several Sundays of the church year which, in my personal calendar, are very significant. This is one of them. To continue the metaphore of Matthew 2, we have been following a star. We have rather enjoyed the journey. It has been arduous but exciting. The anticipation was delicious. Finally, the evening and day arrived. There was magic in the air, the singing of angels, and now today, we are well on the way back to normality. The decorations are down, or soon will be. The parties are over, the gifts have been given, used, some broken or returned, others stored away. This is the important Sunday, however. If you have seen the Christ, if it was King Jesus you

went to Bethlehem to greet, and not baby Jesus, or plastic Jesus, you can't go back the way you came. That's what T.S.Eliot meant, by the way. Once you've seen Jesus Christ you can no longer be at ease in the old kingdoms. This birth causes the death of old ways, old patterns, old stereotypes.

Let me suggest two. Down through history religion has had an unhappy but durable relationship with intolerance.There is no bigot like a religious bigot. Because religiou truth is deeply felt, it seems sometimes antithetical to openness and tolerance. Far too many times Christians, in zeal to keep the faith pure have concluded that heretics can and should be executed, and in zeal to convert the world to Christ have concluded that indigenous religions are meaningless, and their adherents significant only insofar as they become Christians. And today, although we no longer burn at the stake, we continue gleefully to consign to eternal hell those whose portion of the truth is different from ours. But people who have been to Bethlehem can't go home that way any more. People who found Jesus Christ in Bethleham couldn't help but notice that among the first to greet Him were strange looking outsiders, Arabs, not chosen people, with curious customs, languages and funny names.

Former President of Louisville Seminary, Albert Curry Winn, put it succinctly: "What is at stake here theologically is our attitude toward the non-biblical religions. How do we relate them to the finality of Jesus Christ?...God does not despise the religion of outsiders and neither may we." (Proclamation Epiphary Series A, p.11).

The Christmas Newsletter from Corrymeela community in Ballycastle, Northern Ireland arrived this week. The cover was a sign posted on the door of the Bethlehem Inn, made heart-breakingly poignant by the very realities of the brutal violence and intolerance in that land. It read: "I'm sorry, Mr. Joseph. There are no beds here for you. You're a stranger and you're colored. That girl's pregnant. You're a Jew. I can offer you a stable. That's the only thing I'll do. There's no room for heaven here."

The road away from Bethlehem, for those who have seen the Christ, needs to be wider, broader than any we have ever traveled. It may also be an uncomfortable road, perhaps even dangerous. The Magi were the first people to discover that and to experience it. Suddenly the road away from Bethlehem became problematic, complex: so it is whenever we decide to follow Jesus Christ. That decision is never simple, once and for all. Rather the Christian decision comes disguised in other wrappings. As often as not it looks like a political, economic or social choice.

For those who have welcomed the child,the Lordship of Jesus Christ now beckons. What lies ahead for weary Christmas Celebrants is the responsibility to decide to be Christian every single day, every single mile along the way.

As we come to table on the first Sunday of a new year, may we do so in the reverance with which those strange travelers from the East bowed low and opened their gifts. But let us do so also with attention to the future, hearing the invitation of Jesus Christ to follow him down a new and different road of discipleship.

Amen.

God our Father, open us now to the depths of Your love. We have laughed and sung and celebrated the birth. Now give us strength and courage to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.